

**Joan H. Geismar, Ph.D.
Archaeologist**

**40 East 83rd Street
New York, NY 10028
(212) 734-6512
(212) 650-1521 fax
jhg@joanhgeismar.com**

To: John Krawchuk/Director of Historic Preservation/NYCDPR
From: Joan Geismar/Joan H. Geismar, Ph.D., LLC
Re: Thorne/Wilkins/Willets Cemetery, Fort Totten, Queens
Date: June 27, 2016

Vincent and Thomas Loggia, descendants of one of Flushing's founding families, the Thorne (Thorn) - Wilkins Family, have conducted intensive research to document the location and ownership of a family cemetery where their ancestors are buried. This cemetery, which is no longer officially identified but dates to the mid to late 17th century, is located on the grounds of Fort Totten on Willet's Point, Bayside, Queens (Figure 1). At Vincent Loggia's request, I am presenting this material to support the Loggia's appeal to have the cemetery identified informally as the Willets Cemetery on the basis of a memorial stone, hereinafter be recognized as the Thorne - Wilkins Cemetery. This would acknowledge the cemetery's long history as a private family burial ground located within what became a military preserve but is now in part a public park. To support Mr. Loggia's request, I have reviewed and analyzed the extensive material he and his brother have amassed regarding the burial ground's history. This includes deeds, testimony from government hearings, and military surveys to name but a few items. Copies/excerpts of selected supporting documents will be found in Appendix A.



Figure 1. Location of the Thorne - Wilkins Family Burial Ground within Fort Totten (aerial photo courtesy of V. Loggia)

Questions include 1) Did the Thorne-Wilkins family cemetery predate government acquisition of the land? 2) If so, does the cemetery still exist? 3) And if so, who is buried in this cemetery now identified/implies as the Willets Cemetery? and 4) What is the cemetery's appropriate name?

THE THORNE - WILKINS CEMETERY AT FORT TOTTEN

At the time of the Revolutionary War, Willet's Point was known as Thorne's Neck or Thorne's Point and remained private property until the process of acquisition by the government began approximately in 1856. According to Clyde A. Syze, who researched the site and recorded his findings in 1967 (Appendix A, Exhibit 1), the Thorne name is cited in military dispatches associated with the short-lived but decisive Battle of Long Island when the English routed colonial troops and took Brooklyn (and New York City and Staten Island). However, Vincent Loggia has traced the history and ownership of the property to his 17th- century Thorne ancestors. Beginning in 1645 with a Dutch grant to William Thorne, Sr., an Englishman, this ownership endured for ten generations.

Syze notes that the Thorne - Wilkins family burying ground is cited in the deed from Jacob Thorne Wilkins to Charles Willets when the property was sold out of the family. The deed to Willets, dated November 16, 1829, specifically references the exclusion of an extant burial ground and its access right-of-way, "...excepting and reserving the burial ground on said farm for the purpose of burial only and the right of way to the same" (Figure 2). With Willets' purchase, the property became known as Willets Point, but the Thorne burial ground remained the domain of the Thorne - Wilkins family.

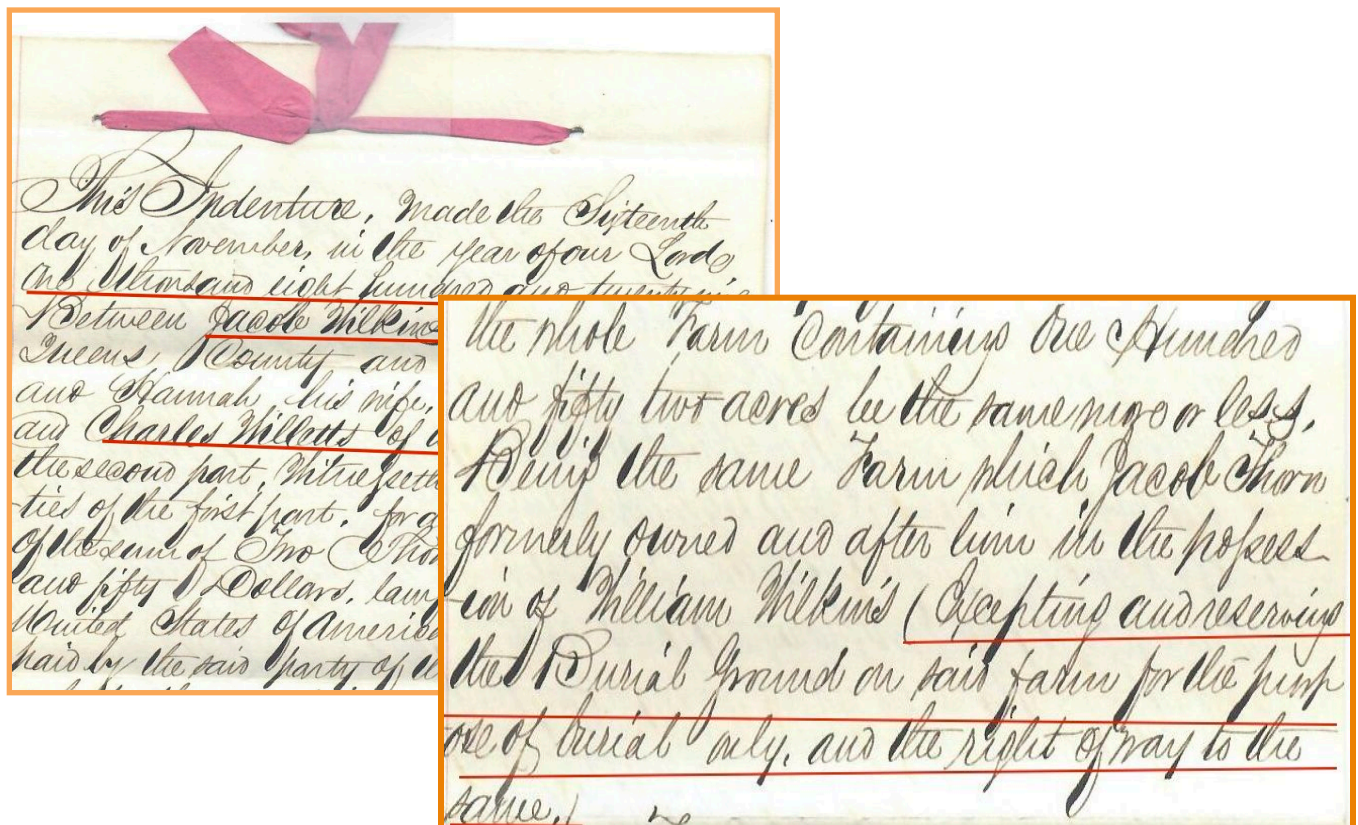


Figure 2. Wilkins to Willets 1829 with exception re Burial Ground and Right-of-Way (Courtesy of V. Loggia)

Willets died in 1833 and was buried on his farm at Willets' Point, possibly on the land he had recently acquired from Jacob Thorne Wilkins and where he had built a dwelling. However he was a resident of Flushing prior to obtaining the Thorne -Wilkins property and his burial place is not actually known. According to Mr. Loggia's research, if he was buried in the Thorne - Wilkins cemetery, it would have been at the discretion of Jacob Thorne Wilkins, the last Thorne - Wilkins owner of the property since the cemetery was excepted from Willets' purchase and remained the property of the Thorne - Wilkins family. Wherever Willets was buried in 1833, the family removed his remains from his "Flushing farm" in 1855 for reinterment at Green-Wood Cemetery in Kings County (Figure 3). Just why this occurred more than twenty years after Willets' death is unrecorded. However, even if Charles Willets initially was buried in the Thorne-Wilkins family cemetery, his remains were removed a year or so before the government began its acquisition of the portion of the property where the cemetery is located (the imminent land transfer to the government may have prompted the removal, but this is speculative).¹

Charles Willets

Memorial
Photos
Flowers
Share
Edit

[Learn about sponsoring this memorial...](#)

Birth: 1781
Death: 1833
Flushing
Queens County
New York, USA

The above is his date of burial or reburial. I am assuming that he died somewhere in New York State but that might not be the case. His is the oldest grave at the Green-Wood Cemetery online listing where the surname is spelled Willets. (Other spellings of the name are Willet, Willett, and Willetts.)


Family links:
Spouse:
Ann W. Lowerre Lewis (1805 - 1890)*

Children:
Martha Seaman Willets Warnock (1824 - 1857)*
Charles A. Willets (1826 - 1899)*
Mary Elizabeth Seaman Willets Degrauw (1830 - 1907)*


*Calculated relationship

Burial:
[Green-Wood Cemetery](#)
Brooklyn
Kings County (Brooklyn)
New York, USA
Plot: Lot 95, Section 107

Created by: [Barbara Doxey](#)
Record added: Dec 03, 2009
Find A Grave Memorial# 45082348



Added by: [Wallace G Lane Jr](#)



Added by: [Wallace G Lane Jr](#)

Figure 3. Charles Willets' Gravestone in Plot 95 in Green-Wood Cemetery (Information From Find A Grave Courtesy of V. Loggia). Although severely weathered, the inscription reads, "OUR FATHER."

¹ Parenthetically, Willets' widow and two of his children--two daughters--are interred in Green-Wood near Willets, her first husband and their father. A son, Charles A. Willets, Jr. (1826 – 1899) is buried in Flushing Cemetery (Findagrave.com) with other members of the family who died after 1857.

The original 152+-acre Thorne family tract and the cemetery exception remained inviolate through two subsequent owners. However, in 1856, when the land was divided and part of it sold to Henry Day, an “indenture of agreement” mentions a provision to release the burial ground from Thorne control (Liber of Deeds [LD] 147:201-203), but this did not happen. The following year, the remainder of the Thorne - Wilkins tract—the lion’s share—was sold to George Irving (LD 150:605-608). An 1857 letter from John F. Carll, Surveyor, to Brigadier General Joseph G. Totten, Chief of USA Engineers, after whom Fort Totten is named, reiterates the cemetery exception in reference to George Irving’s deed to the government. It also provides a sketch of the burial ground’s corrected dimensions (Figure 3). The information not only defines the cemetery, but also its location on Henry Day’s land.

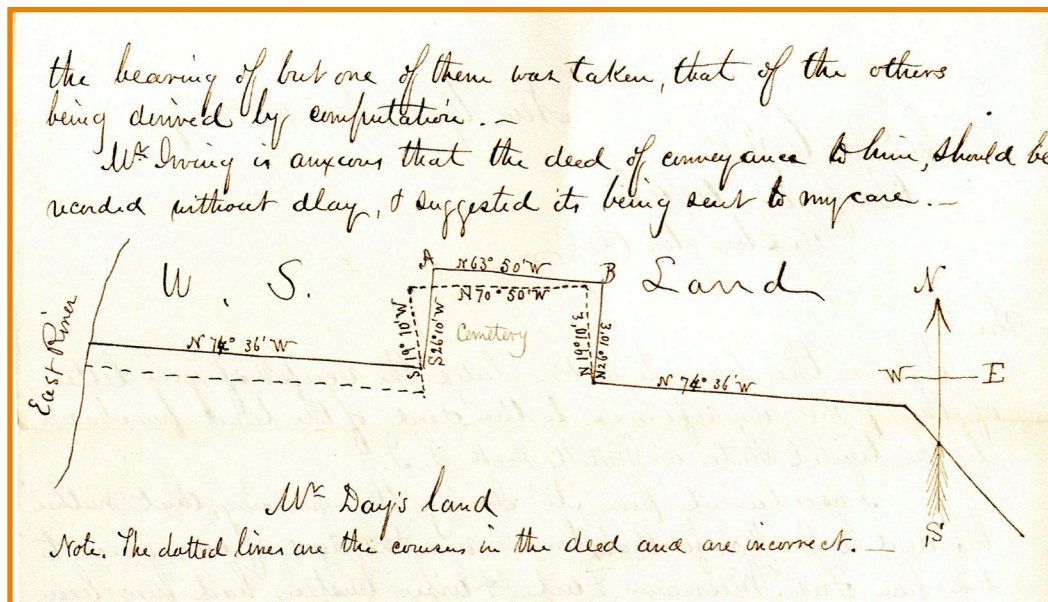


Figure 3. Thorne - Wilkins Cemetery re Dimensions Corrected by John Carll, Surveyor, in Regard to George Irving’s 1857 Deed to the U. S. Government (Letter to Brigadier General Joseph G. Totten, November 10, 1857, detail)

Between April 1857 and April 1863, the U. S. Government finalized acquisition of the Irving and Day properties to create Fort Totten. In addition to the above-mentioned 1857 Carll sketch, there are several government surveys that document the Thorne - Wilkins Cemetery on the property (e.g., Figures 4 and 5). There is also testimony from an 1858 Congressional hearing where the existence and persistence of the cemetery is acknowledged despite some ambiguity about whether it’s located on Day or Irving property (Appendix A, Exhibit 2).

The government surveys,² one related to the government’s 1857 purchase of Irving’s Willets Neck land (see Figure 4), the other to the finalized purchase of Day’s property in 1863 (see Figure 5), indicate what was then a 50 by 40/30 foot (15.2 m by 12.2/9.1 m) burial ground located on a rise where the Willets memorial stone now stands, albeit now a larger gore. By 1895, a Civil War-era cemetery is documented about a third of a mile to the south, but the Thorne - Wilkins burial ground is no longer identified (Figure 6).

²In the collection of the U. S Cartographic Archives, NARA, College Park, MD.

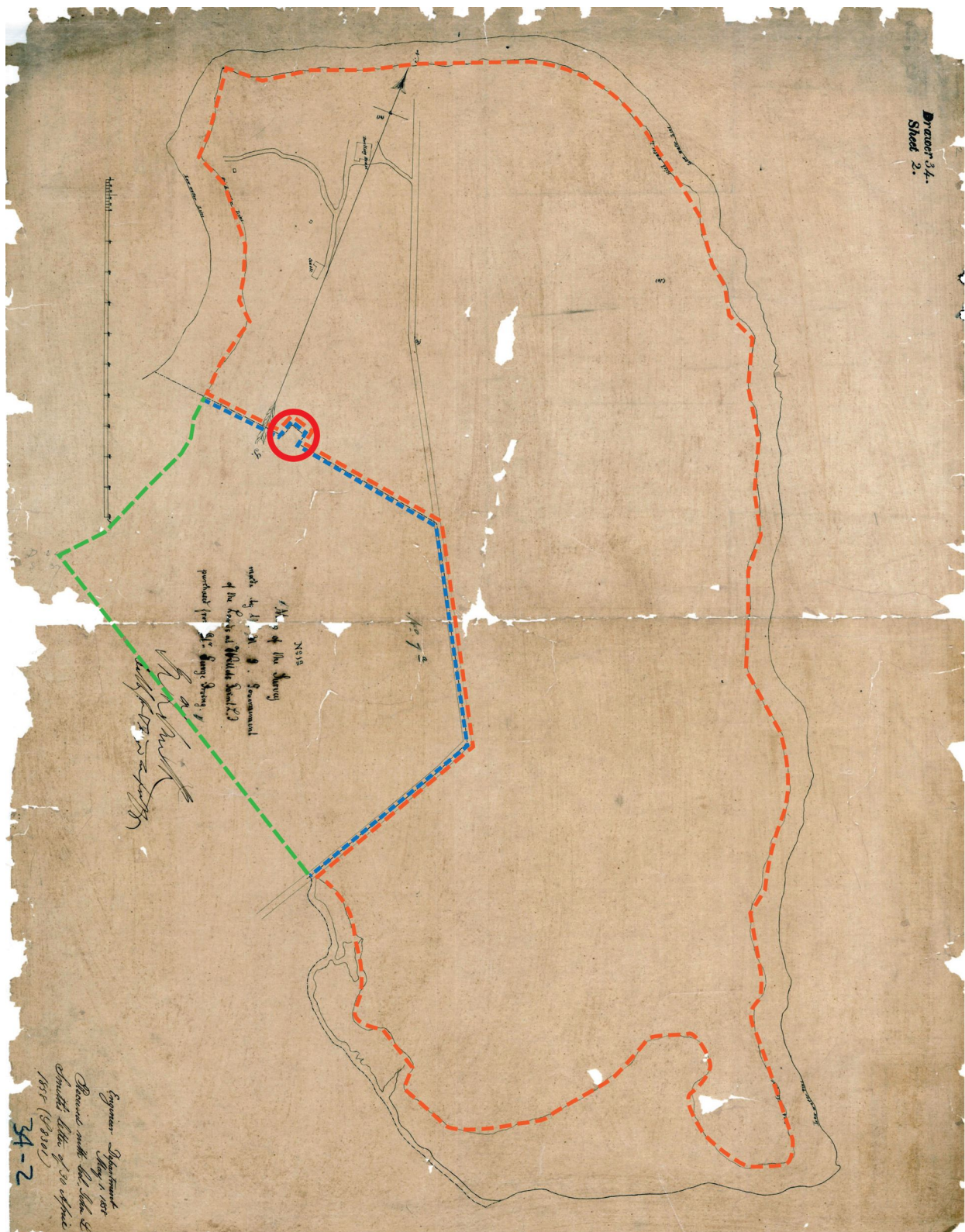
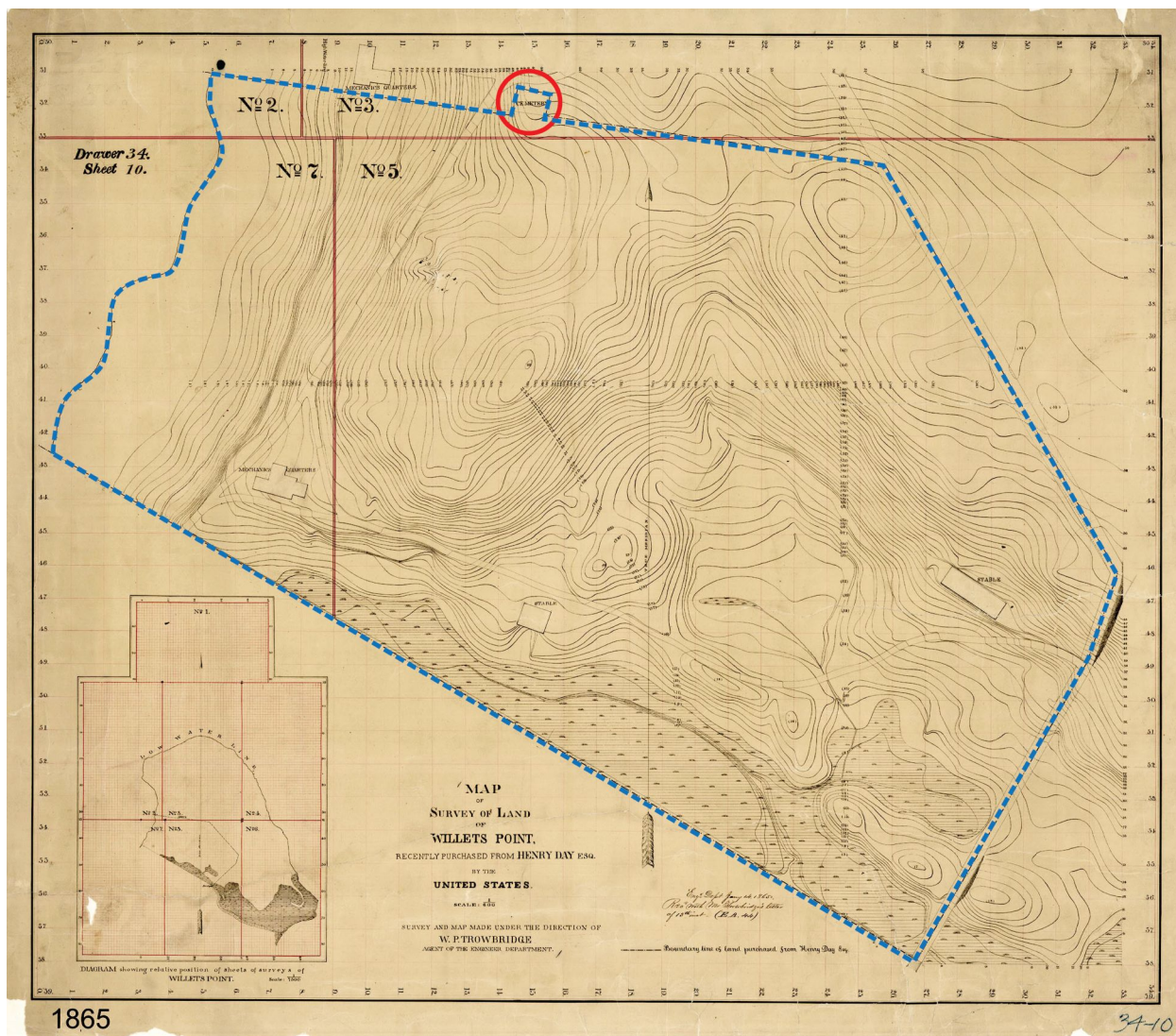


Figure 4. 1860 Government Survey with the Thorne - Wilkins Cemetery included in Henry Day's Property. Survey Based on 1858 Survey Notes (NARA courtesy of V. Loggia)



○ Thorne-Wilkins cemetery - - - - - Henry Day's property to U.S.

Figure 5. Detail of Henry Day's Property on an 1865 U. S. Government Survey Prepared Under the Direction of W. P. Trowbridge, Agent of the Engineer Department. The Thorne – Wilkins Cemetery is Documented as part of Day's Tract. (NARA Courtesy of V. Loggia)



X Thorne-Wilkins cemetery location (not indicated)

□ Civil War cemetery

Figure 6. 1895 Survey (Under the Direction of Lt. Col. R. B. King) of Fort Totten Showing the Location of a Civil War-Era Cemetery. The Thorne - Wilkins Family Burial Ground is No Longer Indicated. (NARA Courtesy of V. Loggia)

James Thorne, Jr. visited the burial ground on August 2, 1857, that is, about the time the U. S. Government began to acquire the land, and sketched five badly weathered tombstones. Among them is a stone believed to mark the grave of John Thorne who died in 1709 ["I.T. 1709"] (Syze 1967); excerpts from Notebook of Mary Thorne Jackson [1966]; Figure 7). To date, there has been no indication that Thorne - Wilkins family members buried in the cemetery for generations were ever removed.

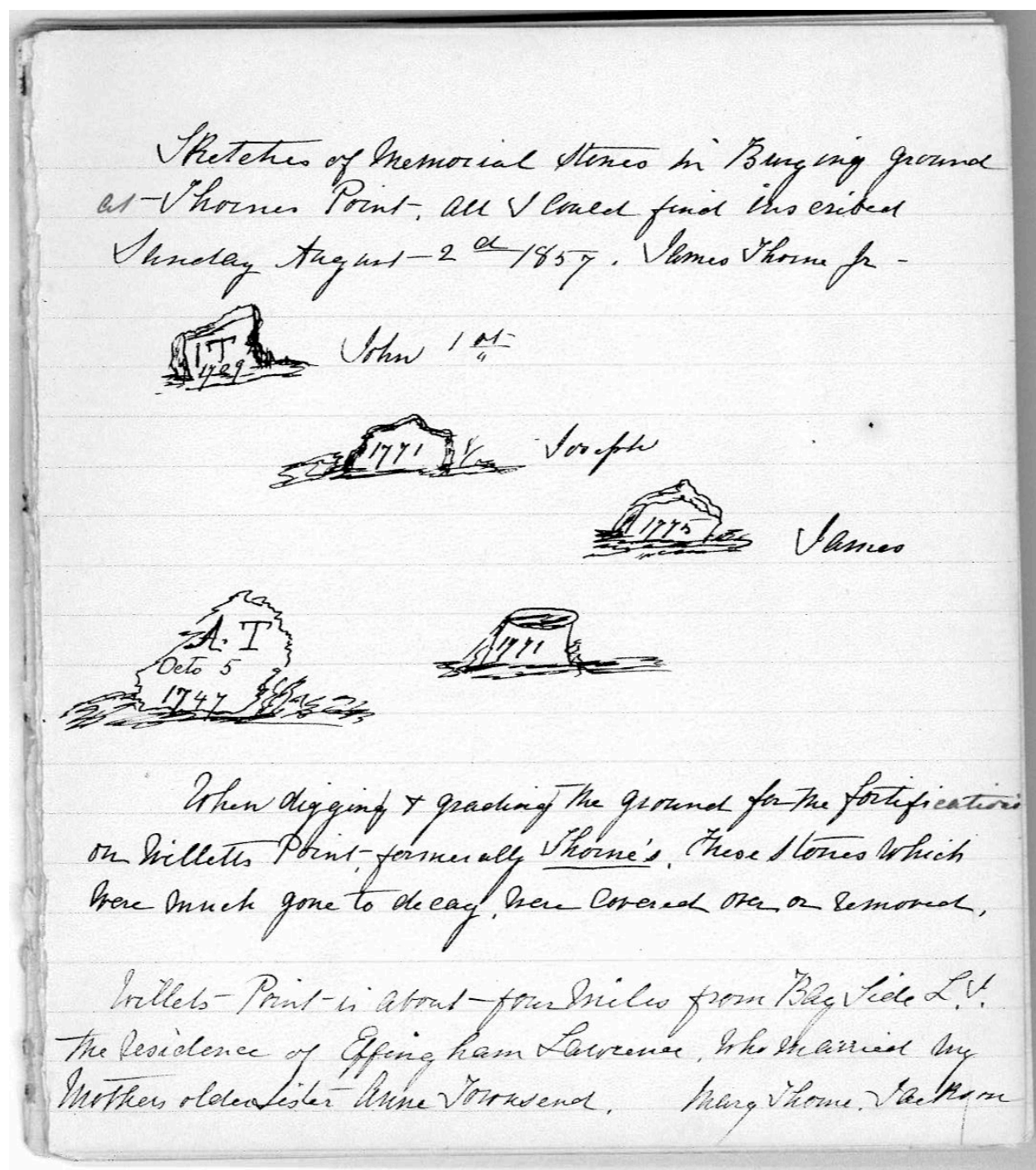


Figure 7. Sketch by James Thorne of memorial stones in the Thorne - Wilkins Burial Ground on August 2, 1857, subsequently covered over or removed. (Transcript of Mary Thorne Jackson's notebook from the Collection of the Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford; Courtesy of V. Loggia)

Today, the single memorial stone that stands on the site of the burial ground supposedly marks Charles Willets, Sr.'s grave (Photos 1 and 2) but, in fact, it may merely mark his former presence in the cemetery, and even this is speculative. Exactly when and by whom the stone was erected is also speculative but a 1937 newspaper article, albeit with egregious historical information, indicates it was then in place (*Brooklyn Eagle*, June 17, 1937:1).³ A weathered stone in Green-Wood Cemetery marks Charles Willets' actual grave (Photo 2). This is corroborated by Green-Wood's records that also document the date of Willets' birth (1781) and of his death (1833)⁴ as well as his 1855 reinterment in Green-Wood (Appendix A, Exhibit 3). It seems, therefore, that Willets' stone on the former fort property does not mark an actual grave but merely documents the possible former burial place of the progenitor of the Willets Point name. Rather, extensive and compelling evidence suggests this stone actually identifies the location of the small, family burial ground of the property's original owners, the Thorne - Wilkins Family, at what was initially Thorne's Point or Neck.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Based on the information amassed by Vincent and Thomas Loggia, part of it presented here, their request to acknowledge that the burial ground now identified by Charles A. Willets' stone is actually the historical and long-established burial ground of the Thorne - Wilkins family is supported by the historical evidence. To acknowledge the validity of their request will highlight the site's pre-military use that extends back to a mid-17th-century Dutch patent as well as recognize its association with a historical Flushing family. It also acknowledges the somewhat unique situation of a private burial ground that persists within what became a military domain but is now a public park.

I do hope the information presented here clarifies any issues regarding the cemetery's association and location as well as bolsters the Loggia's request to identify their family's ancestral cemetery and provide a historically valid name, the Thorne - Wilkins Burial Ground. To do so will not only set the historical record to rights but also will provide an intriguing detail of Fort Totten's history and make it known to park visitors.

³ A Civil-War era military cemetery shown on the 1895 map (see Figure 6) should not be confused with the much older Thorne - Wilkins family burial ground a third of a mile to the north.

⁴ The Willets memorial stone records an incorrect date (1832 rather than 1833) for Willets' death.



Photo 1. Site of the Thorne - Wilkins family cemetery as indicated on government surveys with the Charles A. Willets memorial stone in the center background (arrow). The view is north. (Photo: J. Geismar 6-19-16)



Photo 2. Charles A. Willets Memorial Stone. His date of death actually was 1833. (Photo: J. Geismar 6-19-16)

APPENDIX A: Selected Data

EXHIBIT 1. Syze, Clyde A. (February 23, 1967)

Feb. 23, 1967
(page 2)

Notes regarding U. S. Abstract of Title, 1857
Willets Point (present Ft. Totten)

of Flushing or anywhere else in the Province of New York.
(New York Co. Wills, 7:416).

That John Thorne owned the Willets Point land is indicated by the sale of the southern portion of his property, not on the neck or point but adjacent to it, specified as being in the vicinity of "Mattagarrisson bay within ye bounds of Flushing. " (Mattagarrissons bay was present Little Neck Bay.) This southerly property was sold to Anthony Field June 22, 1670, and was described as "bounded on ye west by land of John Lawrence, easterly with the bay---and northerly to the lands of ye afore-said John Thorne" (Queens Co. Deeds A:85).

* * * * *

The above is as far back as the Willets Point property can be traced, at least with information presently available in actual records. However this area was probably the place of settlement of William Thorne of Flushing, father of the above John Thorne, who settled in the township of Flushing at least as early as 1648, and who was a signer of the Flushing Remonstrance in 1657.

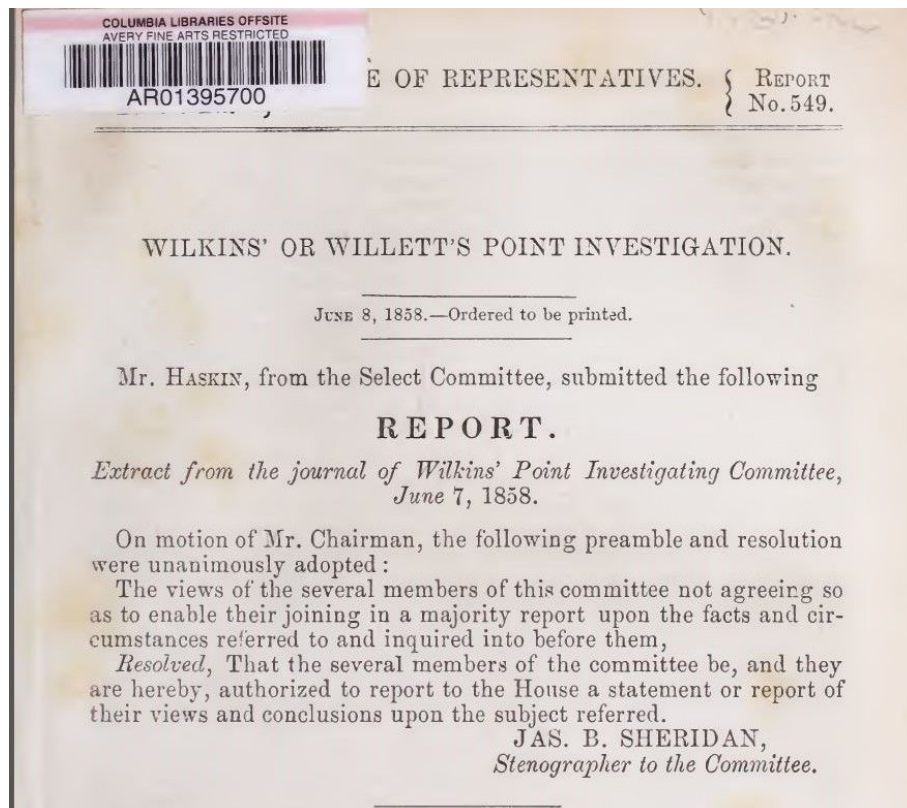
Willets Point was evidently called Thorne's Neck or Point as early as the time of the American Revolution. It is so described in dispatches from this area at the time of the Battle of Long Island, reporting on the presence of ~~English~~ ^{British} ships lying between Thorne's Point and Great Neck.

There is evidence of an early family burying ground within the present Fort area. This is mentioned in the deed from Jacob Wilkins to Charles Willets, and is also referred to in later conveyances of this property.

A notebook in the possession of the Connecticut Historical Society, kept by Mary Thorne Jackson, also refers to the property and to this burying ground. In her verbatim transcription of earlier ~~verbal~~ ^{written} notes made by her brother, James Thorne, an attorney, mention is made of his visit to the Point on Aug. 2, 1857, when he copied grave-stone inscriptions. Among these stones he evidently found the marker of John Thorne, above, bearing only the legend "I T 1709." There were also other stones.

Clyde A. Syze
357 Hollywood Ave.
Douglaston, N. Y. 11363

EXHIBIT 2. Excerpted Testimony Before the House of Representatives *re* the Thorne - Wilkins Burial Ground at Fort Totten associated with government ownership. Hearing held June 7, 1858



Testimony in regard to the burial ground (examination of George Irving: excerpted from page 206):

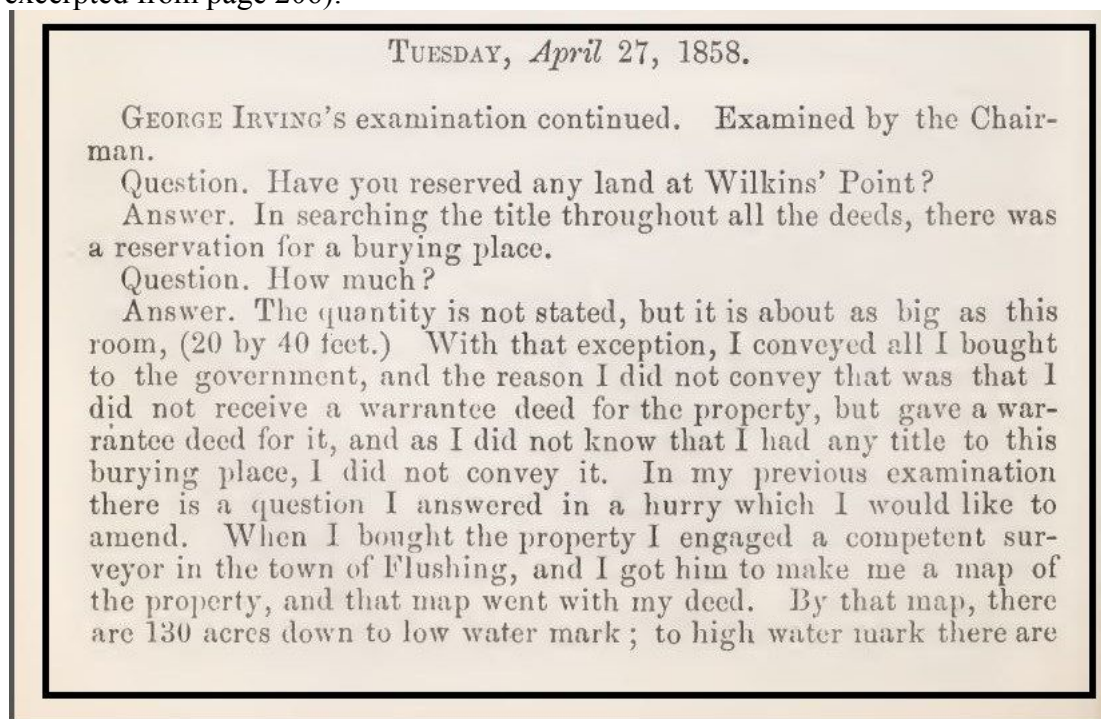


EXHIBIT 2. (continues)

Excerpted Testimony Before the House of Representatives *re* the Thorne - Wilkins Burial Ground at Fort Totten associated with government ownership. Hearing held June 7, 1858

Page 207: Testimony continues regarding the burial ground:

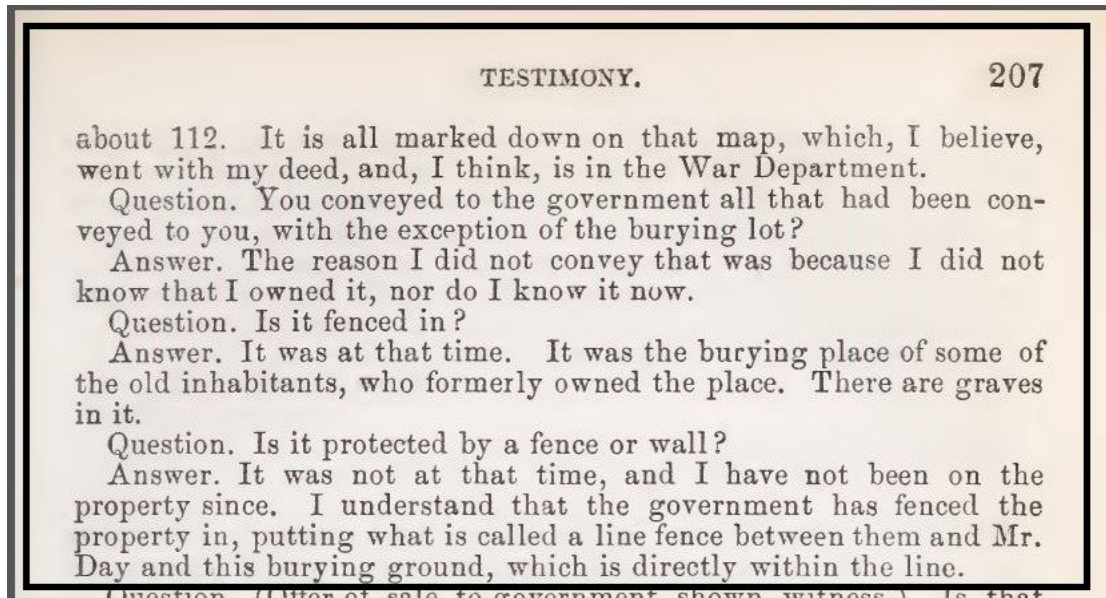


EXHIBIT 3. Selected Documentation from Green-Wood Cemetery Regarding the Re-interment of Charles A. Willets on June 18, 1855.



Record of

CHARLES WILLETS

Interred on 18 June 1855 in Lot 95 in Section 107

Date of Death:	not recorded
Late Residence:	not recorded
Place of Death:	not recorded
Age at Time of Death:	not recorded
Marital Status:	not recorded
Birthplace:	not recorded
Cause of Death:	not recorded
Funeral Director:	S.W. Fowler
Remarks:	Removal from Flushing, Long Island
Interment No.	41,851

*Compiled from Chronological Book
by Mark Daly, Green-Wood Genealogy Team
February 5, 2015*



EXHIBIT 3. Selected Documentation from Green-Wood Cemetery Regarding the Re-interment of Charles A. Willets on June 18, 1855 (continued)

Page 2 of 8

Research on Lot 95 at Green-Wood, Brooklyn, NY
For Vincent Loggia
January 2015

Early Interments in Lot

The early interments in the lot:

- 18 Jun 1855 – Charles Willets** (removal from Flushing, Long Island)
- 07 Apr 1857 – Martha Warnock**, age 32, married, born Long Island, died Geneva, N.Y.
(this is possibly Martha S. Warnock, daughter of lot owner Ann Lewis)
- 09 Jun 1857 – Abram J.S. Degraw**, age 9 months
(later removed to Lot 16261)
- 07 Mar 1867 – James A. Warnock** (also Wainock), age 12, residence Geneva, N.Y.
(likely a child of Martha)
- 08 Sep 1873 – Stella Lewis**, age 5 months
- 29 Jan 1878 – Morris F. (Fosdick) Degrauw**, age 10 years
(later removed to Lot 16261)
- 18 Sep 1879 – Mabel C. (Clair) Lewis**, age 1 month
- 21 May 1880 – removals of Abram & Morris Degraw/Degrauw**
[sometime in 1886, lot owner Ann Willets Lewis possibly dies]
- 14 Apr 1886 – Hugh Warnock**, age 76, widowed, born Ireland, died Geneva, N.Y.
(possibly the husband of Martha)
- 04 Sep 1890 – Ann W. Lewis**, age 85, widowed, residence Jamaica, Queens
(Note: not identified in lot records as owner of the lot)

(continues...)

EXHIBIT 3. Selected Documentation from Green-Wood Cemetery Regarding the Re-interment of Charles A. Willets on June 18, 1855 (continued)

62

NO. THE GREEN - WOOD CEMETERY June 18, 1855

THE REMAINS OF Charles Willets WERE THIS DAY

INTERRED IN LOT NO. 95 SECTION NO. GRAVE NO.

UNDERTAKER, S. W. Fowler \$ PAID.

REMARKS, SUPERINTENDENT.

Page 1 of 8

Research on Lot 95 at Green-Wood, Brooklyn, NY
For Vincent Loggia
January 2015

Estimate:

- ❖ Look for lot ownership records for Lot 95, provide vital information for 3 Lewis burials, look for burial orders that explain where burials took place in the lot = 1 hour, \$56
- ❖ Lot photographs = \$25

Lot 95

Lot 95 is in Section 107 of Green-Wood. As its two-digit number suggests, this was one of the earliest lots to be sold at the cemetery after its founding in 1838.

List of interments:

Green-Wood's Burial Search database shows the following interments for Lot 95:

Last Name	First Name	Burial Date	Lot No	Section	Grave
LEWIS	ALICE B.	11/17/1912	95	107	
LEWIS	ANN W.	09/04/1890	95	107	
LEWIS	STELLA	09/08/1873	95	107	
LEWIS	WILLIAM F.	05/22/1904	95	107	11
WARNOCK	HUGH	04/14/1886	95	107	
WARNOCK	JAMES A.	03/07/1867	95	107	
WARNOCK	MARTHA	04/07/1857	95	107	
WILLETS	CHARLES	06/18/1855	95	107	

There are 8 interments listed. (An earlier version of this listing showed only 7 interments, but this appears to have been a database error.)

The database omits several early interments in this lot. Two early interments were later removed to a different lot at Green-Wood. A more complete list of interments and removals appears later in this report.

Purchase of Lot

On 15 Aug 1842, Starks W. Lewis purchased Lot 95.

On 08 Jul 1853, he conveyed (gave or sold) the lot to Ann Willets Lewis of Brooklyn.

All of the interments in the lot took place after this conveyance.